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Trust and management: Explaining cross-national differences in work autonomy

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Trust and management: Explaining cross-national differences in work autonomy

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Trust and Management: Explaining Cross-National Differences in Work Autonomy

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Trust and Management: Explaining Cross-National Differences in Work Autonomy

Abstract

We open the black box of what goes on in firms in terms of management of their operations. Work autonomy is a key aspect of firm organization and we test the hypothesis that societal trust affects the level of autonomy that firms grant to their employees. Analysis of up to 189,213 individuals from 30 countries shows that trust is indeed highly conducive to work autonomy. This result is robust to controlling for a wide range of other features of countries' institutional environment, including measures of labor regulations and institutional quality. Our findings highlight the importance of informal institutions such as societal trust in shaping economic activity.

1. Introduction

In their effort to understand economic development, economists are increasingly digging beyond macro-level data on per-capita output, considering industry and plant-level variation in productivity (Syverson, 2011). Detailed analyses reveal wide and persistent dispersion in productivity levels among firms. To understand these differences, we have to open the black box of what goes on in firms that makes some firms so much more successful than others. Management practices are an important part of the answer (Bloom and Van Reenen, 2007), but only to the extent that they offer a new black box concerning the factors that drive firm heterogeneity in management practices (Van Reenen, 2011).

For some time, researchers have realized that trust matters for organizations, for instance, allowing firms to increase in size while maintaining levels of intra-firm cooperation (La Porta et al., 1997). Similarly, Bloom et al. (2012) empirically demonstrate that so-called bilateral trust, meaning trust between two countries, affects the extent to which multinational companies from a particular home country decentralize and give decision power to local managers in a particular host country. More generally, trust is linked to reduced uncertainty and transaction costs, which increases the extent of the market (Fukuyama, 1995). Many studies subsequently show the benefits of societal trust for economic development (e.g., Algan and Cahuc, 2010; Knack and Keefer, 1997; see Algan and Cahuc, 2013 for a survey).

We link societal trust to work autonomy, which is defined as "the condition or quality of being self-governing or free from excessive external control" (Jermier and Michaels, 2001: 1006). Work autonomy is associated with advantages and disadvantages for firms. Following past thinking on the division of labor (e.g., Becker and Murphy 1992), a key advantage of work

autonomy is that it increases employees' productivity as it sustains more specialization in the production process. At the same time, work autonomy is associated with certain disadvantages, as reflected in the standard principal-agent problem. If workers have complete autonomy, there are no formal governance mechanisms preventing them from pursuing their own interests at the expense of the firm's. Trust, however, mitigates the principal-agent problem. Monitoring and control are simply less urgent when two parties can trust each other, i.e., when the principal can rely on the agent to act in the best interest of the principal without any explicit incentive to do so. Hence, below we test the following hypothesis: *the higher societal trust is, the higher the level of work autonomy that employers grant to their employees*.

2. Empirical analysis

2.1. Data

Measures of work autonomy are typically subjective, asking people to rate their level of autonomy at work. We use data from the well-known European Social Survey (ESS), Wave 1-5 (2002-2004-2006-2008-2010) (http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org). The specific item that we use asks respondents to say how much the management at their work allows/allowed them to decide how their own daily work is organized with answers ranging from 0, "I have/had no influence" to 10, "I have/had complete control." Extensive checks show that the measure thus obtained is valid, correlating with external factors in the precise manner expected. Autonomy increases with skill level and managers have more autonomy than subordinates do, for instance (Table 1). To be sure, our interest is in societal trust and the level of work autonomy of individuals in general. We thus do not study the trust level of a specific principal and how this

affects the autonomy granted to a specific agent, although this can be a question for future research.

<< Insert Table 1 about here >>

We measure trust as aggregated responses to the classic item: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" Answers can range from 0, "You can't be too careful" to 10, "Most people can be trusted." Country scores are aggregated across all five waves to fit the idea that trust is a stable cultural trait with deep, historical roots (e.g., Nunn and Wantchekon, 2011).[1] Data cover up to 189,213 individuals from 30 countries. Although all the countries in the sample have European roots, the sample is actually highly culturally diverse, covering the majority of cultural clusters recognized in the literature.[2] Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the sample as a whole. Table 3 presents detailed country scores for the most important variables.

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[1] Ljunge (2012) uses ESS trust data, among others, to study the cultural transmission of civicness, finding significant intergenerational transmission of civicness.

[2] For instance, the 30 countries in my sample belong to six out of the 10 main cultural clusters identified by the GLOBE project (House et al., 2004), the most comprehensive and up-to-date classification of national cultures currently available. To wit: (1) Nordic cluster: Denmark, Finland, and Sweden included; (2) Anglo cluster: UK and Ireland included; (3) Germanic cluster: Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands included; (4) Latin European cluster: France, Israel, Italy, Portugal, and Spain included; (5) Eastern European cluster: Albania, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Poland, Russia, and Slovenia included; (6) Middle Eastern cluster: Turkey included.

<< Insert Table 2 about here >>

We use gender, age/age-squared, and education level as standard, individual-level control variables. Similarly, we include year/wave dummies to control for any idiosyncrasies in questionnaire design. The main concern is that our results are spurious, driven by unobserved country characteristics. We thus control for a wide range of country factors. Institutional quality may affect both trust and the level of work autonomy that firms are willing to grant to their employees. Therefore, we include measures of Rule of law and Control of corruption from the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators project. Similarly, we include the labor dismissal and labor regulations indexes developed by Botero et al. (2004) to control for formal institutions specifically aimed at governing the relationship between employers and employees. We further control for per-capita GDP, using data from the World Bank World Development Indicators. Finally, to consider the issue of causality we use a pure trust measure that is not co-determined by reigning socio-economic and institutional circumstances. Specifically, we use the inherited component of trust for the year 2000, as developed in Algan and Cahuc (2010). If data are not available, we drop the country from the analysis.

The four cultural clusters not covered by the sample are the African cluster (e.g., Namibia and Zambia), the Confucian cluster (e.g., China and Japan), the Southeast Asian cluster (e.g., India and the Philippines), and the Latin American cluster (e.g., Brazil and Mexico). The countries in the sample not covered by the GLOBE classification (9 in total) are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Luxembourg, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

<< Insert Table 3 about here >>

2.2. Method

Our analysis concerns respondents nested countries. We thus separate the variation at the two levels—between countries and within countries—and model them simultaneously, while taking into account the clustering of observations. The complete model reads as follows:

$$A_{jk} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} T_k + \beta_1 x_{jk} + (u_{0k} + e_{jk}), \quad (1)$$

where A_{jk} denotes the level of work autonomy granted to individual j in country k, T_k is the level of trust, x_{jk} is a set of individual-level control variables (e.g., age), and z_k is a set of country-level control variables (e.g., GDP). γ_{00} is the mean (intercept) that is fixed over all countries. There are two error terms, one at the individual (e_{jk}) and one at the country level (u_{0k}). The model is a mixed model (McCulloch and Searle, 2001) that combines random and fixed effects. Specifically, the country-level error term means that the intercept is allowed to vary across countries, which is a way to incorporate country fixed effects. Values for the country-specific intercepts can be obtained as posterior estimates. The method is Bayesian, applying shrinkage to draw outliers towards the sample distribution and allowing us to make inferences about the entire population of countries rather than just the sample. We estimate the model using maximum likelihood procedures.

2.3. Results

Table 4 presents the results, which confirm our hypothesis. Trust correlates strongly, positively and statistically highly significantly with work autonomy (Model 1). The effect of trust on work autonomy continues to hold when we include the standard set of individual-level controls (see above) and year fixed effects (Model 2).[3] A coefficient of 0.748 means that moving workers from Turkey (trust=2.60) to Denmark (trust=6.90) would increase their autonomy by 3.2 points on the 0-10 scale, ceteris paribus.

<< Insert Table 4 about here >>

Adding a variety of country-level control variables also does not change our results, although the coefficient for trust is typically somewhat lower than before (Models 3-6). In fact, institutions nearly always have a statistically insignificant effect on work autonomy, while the sign may reverse across different model specifications. Finally, results using inherited trust affirm the causal effect of trust on work autonomy (Models 7 and 8). A coefficient of ±11 means that moving workers from Russia (inherited trust=-.121) to Finland (inherited trust=.114) would increase their autonomy by 2.6 points on the 0-10 scale, ceteris paribus.

3. Discussion and conclusion

[3] Models that have the same number of observations are nested, allowing us to use likelihood-ratio tests to assess the statistical significance of changes to model specifications.

We have sought to open the black box of how firms manage their operations, showing that trust fosters the level of autonomy that firms grant to their workers. Management practices are increasingly recognized for their vital implications, both for firms themselves but also for societies as a whole (e.g., Syverson, 2011; Van Reenen, 2011). Similarly, a growing literature is concerned with the economic consequences of informal institutions such as trust (e.g., Algan and Cahuc, 2010; Algan and Cahuc, 2013). Our note contributes to these two developing literatures, showing micro-level ramifications of trust that may go on to impact economies as a whole. Future research may provide a more direct assessment, using micro evidence on trust as a factor shaping economic activity to pin down how exactly trust matters for macro-level economic development.

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Table 1
Validity of the Work Autonomy Measure.

Variable		Mean work autonomy (0-10)	
Manager			
Yes [n=54,252]		7.74	(2.58)
No [n=134,769]		5.14	(3.66)
Education (ES-ISCED)			
I, less than lower secondary [n=12,117]		4.66	(3.89)
II, lower secondary [n=21,160]		4.64	(3.81)
IIIb, upper secondary, vocational or no access V1 [n=29,535]		5.38	(3.67)
IIIa, upper secondary, general and/or access to V1 [n=27,573]		5.64	(3.55)
IV, advanced vocational, sub-degree [n=14,330]		6.44	(3.37)
V1, lower tertiary education, BA level [n=13,356]		7.28	(2.77)
V2, higher tertiary education, >= MA level [n=14,819]		7.36	(2.77)
Allowed to influence policy decisions about activities of organization (0-10)			
0	I have/had no influence [n=53,450]	3.10	(3.65)
1	[n=14,423]	4.16	(3.16)
2	[n=12,051]	5.23	(2.84)
3	[n=9897]	5.78	(2.57)
4	[n=7392]	6.08	(2.37)
5	[n=14,877]	6.70	(2.28)
6	[n=9228]	7.30	(1.87)
7	[n=11,302]	7.82	(1.71)
8	[n=11,835]	8.36	(1.52)
9	[n=6475]	8.87	(1.35)
10	I have/had complete control [n=19,867]	9.81	(0.99)

Notes. Number of observations in square brackets. Standard deviations in parentheses. Data are own calculations based on data from the European Social Survey. ISCED stands for International Standard Classification of Education.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. dev.
Dependent variable					
Work autonomy	189,213	0	10	5.89	3.58
Independent variables					
Societal trust	189,213	2.60	6.90	4.94	.955
Inherited trust in 2000 (relative to Sweden, originally 0-1-scale) (Algan and Cahuc, 2010)	138,758	-.121	.114	-.010	.070
Labor dismissal index (Botero et al., 2004)	178,242	.143	.857	.499	.244
Labor regulations index (Botero et al., 2004)	178,242	.282	.828	.598	.160
Rule of law index (World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators)	189,213	-.969	1.99	1.16	.783
Control of corruption index (World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators)	189,213	-1.09	2.56	1.17	.959
GDP per capita in 2000$ (/10,000) (World Bank World Development Indicators)	189,213	.127	8.64	2.98	1.81
Sex (1=male)	189,213	0	1	.479	.500
Age (/10)	189,213	1.3	12.3	4.75	1.72
Education (ES-ISCED)					
I, less than lower secondary	189,213	0	1	.064	.244
II, lower secondary	189,213	0	1	.112	.315
IIIb, upper secondary, vocational or no access V1	189,213	0	1	.155	.362
IIIa, upper secondary, general and/or access to V1	189,213	0	1	.145	.352
IV, advanced vocational, sub-degree	189,213	0	1	.076	.264
V1, lower tertiary education, BA level	189,213	0	1	.070	.256
V2, higher tertiary education, >= MA level	189,213	0	1	.078	.268
Not possible to harmonize	189,213	0	1	.298	.457
No / missing information	189,213	0	1	.001	.038

Notes. Data are from the European Social Survey and other sources that are indicated.

Table 3
Key Dependent and Independent Variables by Country.

Country	Work autonomy	Societal trust	Inherited trust in 2000 (relative to Sweden, originally 0-1-scale) (Algan and Cahuc, 2010)	Labor dismissal index (Botero et al., 2004)	Labor regulations index (Botero et al., 2004)	Rule of law (World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators)	Control of corruption (World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators)	GDP per capita in 2000$ (World Bank World Development Indicators)
Austria	6.10	5.09	.052	.286	.501	1.88	2.07	33,774
Belgium	6.44	4.95	.087	.143	.513	1.31	1.37	38,420
Bulgaria	4.95	3.44		.143	.519	-.142	-.209	5599
Croatia	4.27	4.38		.571	.488	.127	-.038	13,632
Cyprus	5.97	4.22				1.16	1.14	26,708
Czech Republic	4.32	4.39	-.098	.429	.520	.846	.328	13,974
Denmark	7.37	6.90	.100	.286	.573	1.93	2.47	50,371
Estonia	5.48	5.40				1.08	.907	11,931
Finland	7.20	6.50	.114	.571	.737	1.95	2.42	40,678
France	6.71	4.44	-.085	.857	.744	1.44	1.39	36,533
Germany	6.20	4.71	-.049	.571	.702	1.66	1.80	36,766
Greece	5.51	3.87		.286	.519	.764	.180	22,755
Hungary	4.33	4.20	-.026	.286	.377	.859	.478	10,794
Ireland	5.52	5.45	-.063	.286	.343	1.68	1.57	40,872
Israel	5.99	5.06		.286	.289	.922	.857	24,036
Italy	5.79	4.41	-.120	.429	.650	.612	.419	25,136
Luxembourg	5.51	5.11				1.87	1.95	53,101
Netherlands	6.54	5.82	.001	.714	.726	1.76	2.12	41,229
Norway	7.30	6.67	.063	.714	.685	1.95	2.04	67,096
Poland	5.09	3.98	-.089	.571	.640	.510	.280	9226
Portugal	5.45	3.85	-.033	.714	.809	1.08	1.04	19,039
Russia	4.49	3.98	-.121	.857	.828	-.901	-.998	8549
Slovakia	4.45	4.08		.571	.657	.543	.333	13,644
Slovenia	5.52	4.08		.714	.736	.946	.926	19,499
Spain	5.95	4.98	.013	.714	.745	1.13	1.15	27,510

Table 3, continued.

Country	Work autonomy	Societal trust	Inherited trust in 2000 (relative to Sweden, originally 0-1-scale) (Algan and Cahuc, 2010)	Labor dismissal index (Botero et al., 2004)	Labor regulations index (Botero et al., 2004)	Rule of law (World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators)	Control of corruption (World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators)	GDP per capita in 2000$ (World Bank World Development Indicators)
Sweden	7.53	6.21	0	.714	.740	1.89	2.24	43,533
Turkey	5.30	2.60		.286	.403	.093	-.038	7316
Ukraine	4.33	4.12		.857	.661	-.802	-.836	2326
UK	6.56	5.25	-.046	.143	.282	1.70	1.76	38,815
Whole sample	5.76 (.973) [30]	4.79 (.992) [30]	-.013 (.075) [19]	.487 (.242) [27]	.587 (.159) [27]	1.06 (.796) [30]	1.04 (.962) [30]	27,997 (16,962) [30]

Notes. See Table 2. Number of observations in square brackets. Note that averages for the sample pertain to country-level observations and are not weighted by the number of respondents in a country as in Table 1. For this reason, the means of Table 1 and this table cannot be compared. Country scores on Rule of law, Control of corruption, and GDP are matched with the years of the ESS survey (2002-2004-2006-2008-2010).

Table 4
Societal Trust as a Determinant of Work Autonomy.

Dependent=Work autonomy (0-10)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Trust (0-10)	.734*** (.119)	.748*** (.123)	.562*** (.123)	.749*** (.119)	.743*** (.128)	.637*** (.130)		
Inherited trust							9.11*** (2.32)	13.1*** (3.32)
Rule of law			.129 (.113)			-.066 (.119)		-.178 (.135)
Control of corruption			.140 (.076)			.129 (.077)		-.151 (.086)
Labor dismissal index				-1.83 (.907)		-1.64 (.849)		1.67 (2.08)
Labor regulations index				2.94* (1.38)		2.70* (1.28)		-1.32 (3.01)
GDP (/10,000)					.004 (.023)	.035 (.024)		.001 (.026)
Standard, individual-level controls and Wave/Year dummies included	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No. of individuals	189,213	189,213	189,213	178,242	189,213	178,242	138,758	138,758
No. of countries	30	30	30	27	30	27	19	19
-2Loglikelihood	1,004,907.7	990,892.9	990,885.3	931,831.5	990,892.9	931,826.1	716,212.5	716,204.3

Notes. Standard errors in parentheses. Clustering at the country level is taken into account. All models include country fixed effects via random intercepts. *, **, and *** denotes statistical significance at the 5%, 1%, and 0.1% level (two-tailed). The labor dismissal and labor regulations indexes do not have time-series variation, but country scores on the other country-level control variables are matched with the year of the survey (2002-2004-2006-2008-2010).

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